

# gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

September 2012



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Conflict Then and Now



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## GATHERINGS

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VOICES

## Woolgathering

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

### The other day I ran

across the word *woolgathering*. Have you heard of it? It means to indulge in idle fancies and daydreaming. It implies absent-mindedness. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm in favor of a certain amount of idleness and daydreaming every day. It feeds my imagination and helps me process information. I think it makes me more creative.

When I was a kid, I loved sitting at the local park with my friends Linda and Joanne and just watching clouds overhead. We were each lost in our own thoughts, daydreaming about how life would be when we were older and able to do what we wanted when we wanted. I didn't realize until much later what a fantasy that was—turns out that even when you are an adult with a driver's license and a paycheck, you don't always get to do what you want when you want.

Life is busy and messy and each day has its own demands. Which is why carving out time to let your mind wander can help you feel restored. It's like taking a drink of cold water after a long walk. You feel ready to begin again.

Now that it's September and we're ready to put away sandals and shorts, we are beginning again: The new Bible study, "Gathered by God," written by Audrey West starts in this issue. Audrey tells us that "From beginning to end—from Genesis to Revelation—the Bible affirms this: In the beginning, God gathers the waters to give life to the people. In the end, God gathers the people to give the waters of life."

And when we gather, we experience God's presence. Megan Torgerson writes: "Whether in worship or service, with family or strangers, in your hometown or on the other side of the world, you have experienced the way God is present wherever two or three are gathered. The power of God's presence is magnified by sharing the world with others."

But dealing with others is not always easy: Even in the church, we have conflicts and clashes. Myrna Sheie reflects on Jesus' admonition in Matthew 18: "When Jesus says, 'Go,' we have a choice to make. When we choose to follow our own instincts and take a different path, we wander on our own. We discover little peace in the midst of conflict when we complain, gossip, manipulate, turn others against the person, or isolate ourselves. Jesus is clear: in difficult situations, our priority is to tend to the relationship."

Sandi Paulson tends to a different kind of relationship—one with the earth. In "Spirituality in the Garden," Sandi reminds us to take a breather—and she knows the perfect place. "And, at the end of the day, especially at the end of a long day of *gardening*, there is absolutely nothing more wonderful than 'walking in the garden in the evening breeze,' as God did in Genesis 3:8."

As school starts, congregations begin a new year of programs, and we find our calendars filling up, let's remember to carve out a little time for woolgathering amid the busy days.

**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Gather*. You may write to her at [gather@elca.org](mailto:gather@elca.org).



GIVE US THIS DAY

## Words Not Spoken

by Deanna Nowadnick

### I have to think every

person in attendance at our wedding was sighing a silent, "Finally!" After nine years of dating, breaking up, and getting back together, Kurt and I finally tied the knot.

My husband and I are a study in contrasts. He's thoughtful, speaking when he has something to say. I'm a ditz, often talking before thinking. Kurt believes in the power of positive thinking. I'm a chapter on neuroses. Despite our difference, we have navigated a 30-year marriage with joy and harmony, thanks in large part to the patience and good humor of my husband.

"Had I been Kurt, I would have filed for divorce after our family getaway in December 2003. For that holiday, we made arrangements to spend a week at a resort in Idaho. The boys expected to ski and snowboard. I would relax with a good book and my knitting. For Christmas we planned to meet my brother and his family for dinner.

After surviving a seven-hour trek to our destination, we kicked the snow from our shoes and slumped onto the couch of our rented condo, glad to be done with a nightmarish drive through steep terrain and icy road conditions. After a brief rest on the couch, I looked around and asked, "Where's my suitcase?"

While barking orders in our preparations to leave, I had neglected to bring my own suitcase. Now we were 347 miles from home and I was without toothbrush, change of clothes, Christmas outfit, and Christmas gifts. Kurt calmly said, "I'll go get it. I can be back

by morning." After a tense exchange, I convinced Kurt that I should travel with him. I silently cursed my negligence. How could I have overlooked my suitcase? Now I just wanted to get home, get some sleep, get the suitcase, and get back.

Then at milepost 45, we blew a tire. It was near midnight and we were on a snowy highway miles from home. Making it to an exit ramp, Kurt stopped and began the miserable task of changing the tire.

He never said a word. Kurt had every right to remind me that I was the one to forget the suitcase. But he never said a word. In love and kindness, he changed the tire and got us home. In love and kindness, he drove us back to Idaho—with my suitcase—for a wonderful week as a family.

On a dark exit ramp, I learned the depth of a man's love and commitment to his family. I learned that I was sharing life with a man of immeasurable love and devotion. God had showered me with grace throughout my life and throughout my marriage, but God chose that miserable night to shine a flashlight on it. In 15 hours—the time it had taken to leave and return again—I learned more about God's love and Kurt's love than I had in my 49 years of life and 22 years of marriage.

That night, God met me with grace I didn't deserve. It was a moment that shone light on many things that never get said in a marriage.

**Deanna Nowadnick** lives in Monroe, Wash., with her husband. She's a member of Peace Lutheran Church and author of *Fruit of My Spirit: Reframing Life in God's Grace*.



SPIRITUALITY IN THE

*Garden*

by Sandra Paulson



BEFORE I GOT MARRIED, I NEVER GARDENED. As a kid, I had a brief flirtation with wanting my own garden (I was probably about 8 years old) and I remember my mom letting me pick the seeds, plant them, and tend them. She pointed out that I would have to pick the taller plants for the back row, the medium plants for the middle row, and the shorter ones for the front row, which I did. Then I prepared the soil and planted the three different kinds of seeds.

I remember my joy when they came up and the flowers bloomed—I created that all by myself! (Or so I thought.) But of course the tending part wasn't quite as appealing as the creation part, and I don't recall spending much time communing with my little garden the rest of that summer.

But 15 years ago, my new husband and I decided that we really wanted to learn to make and can our own salsa. My mother and my aunt couldn't understand "*why in the WORLD we would WANT to can.*" They, of course, had spent weeks and months canning on the farm where they grew up—shelling peas for days on end, sitting under the shade trees in the yard. The bloom was definitely off the rose as far as they were concerned—it was store-bought canned goods

for them once they became adults in charge of their own agendas.

But sometimes ignorance is the best motivator. We wanted to make and can our own salsa, so we started a vegetable garden. It wasn't the gardening we were interested in—it was the salsa. The garden started out small—mostly tomatoes and peppers with a few carrots and green beans thrown in. We needed help from my brother-in-law to plant our garden since we had never done it.

And, just as when I was a child, the novelty wore off as the weeds grew (and grew and grew). But the next year we planted another vegetable garden, having learned a few things in the process: Weeding is much easier if you do it frequently instead of leaving it for weeks and weeks.

## THE GIFT IN THE PROCESS

Our gardening experiment became something of an obsession over the years—for me, at least. I’m the dreamer, the planner, and the planter. My husband is the good-natured and willing partner—tilling, lugging bags of mulch, and cutting out more sod, it seems, almost every year. I’ve decided over the past 15 years that grass is highly overrated and a person doesn’t need much of it, especially if children aren’t around.

A year or so after the vegetable garden experiment (which continued on, not so much as an experiment anymore, but as an actual working vegetable garden), I started a couple of flower gardens and a shrub border. Honestly, the shrub border was mostly because we couldn’t afford a fence. Since I really had no idea what I was doing at the time, those gardens have mostly been completely re-worked, a bit at a time—but that’s one of the most important things I’ve learned about gardening. It’s the process that’s the important part. For me, it’s therapy.

The gardening is the part that I have come to love, not necessarily the finished product. I do enjoy my beautiful gardens and I love spending time in them, but as any gardener will tell you, the process is really never finished. As you grow and learn as a gardener, your ideas and goals tend to change as well.

## A REVELATION

When we had been gardening for only a few years, I discovered a surprising and wonderful thing: the Master Gardener program at North Dakota State University. I think you can find these programs at most state universities. The program accepts absolutely anyone—even a person like I was at the time, with no experience or training. All I had to do was pay for the materials and attend the classes.

What a revelation!

I couldn’t learn enough about gardening—I enjoyed those eight Saturdays so much, I was actually disappointed when the class was over and I was “official.”

But, the learning process had just begun.

I’ve always considered myself a spiritual person. I attended church as a child and still do as an adult. But I also felt like it was more habit: I did it because it was expected of me, not because of some great need inside myself.

But something happened when I started gardening. I started feeling a deep connection to not only my little bit of earth, but to all of God’s creation. When my perennials come up in the spring, it feels like old friends coming to visit. I talk to them. I can’t help it. I say, “Hey, good to see you, I missed you!” (I’m sure my neighbors think I’m absolutely nuts.)

I don’t know if it’s possible to plant a seed, nurture it, watch it grow, (in some cases) harvest the fruit, and not feel a connection to the earth. As Amy Stewart said in her book *From the Ground Up*, “When you set out to work on a garden, something surprising happens. The garden goes to work on you, too. In the process of bringing a patch of earth to life, your life is transformed.”

*Your life is transformed.* This passage speaks to me in such a profound way. I don’t know how a person can care for the things in the soil without feeling the Creator that’s behind and around all things—the sight of tiny seeds sprouting always seems like such a miracle to me.

## MANY TRANSFORMATIONS

I know that gardening has certainly transformed *my* life. For one, it has taught me patience. I’ve often prayed to God for patience, but I also know that God doesn’t always give us what we ask for in the *way* we would like it given to us.

I wanted patience. I wasn’t necessarily thinking that I would learn patience by having to wait years for my plants to grow and fill in. When I started gardening, I made the beginner’s mistake of planting everything close together, because I wanted a full garden right from the start. Well, I learned the hard way that you have to plant further apart, because plants

*will* grow. And it might take them years to reach their full size. It's difficult not learn patience when you have to plan in terms of years, not weeks or even months.

Gardening has taught me that good things are worth waiting for, and good things also happen along the way. It's the journey that matters—the connection to God's incredible earth and the opportunity to beautify at least a small portion of it.

Another part of my new connection to the earth is my fascination with the weather. As gardener Marcellen Cox once said, "Weather means more when you have a garden. There's nothing like listening to a shower and thinking how it is soaking in around your green beans."

Before I started gardening I never thought much about the rain (other than as a nuisance), or the wind (and how it destroys my delphiniums every year), or how all of the things on this earth are intertwined and connected.

Gardening has taught me that God's creation is worth caring for, in spite of the many frustrations. The good earth is worth treasuring and saving for future generations—which is getting more and more complicated as we humans grow more and more greedy.

Karel Capek writes in *The Gardener's Year*, "We gardeners live

somewhat for the future; if roses are in flower, we think that next year they will flower better; and in some few years this little spruce will become a tree—if only those few years were behind me! I should like to see what these birches will be like in 50 years. The right, the best is in front of us. Each successive year will add growth and beauty. Thank God that again we shall be one year farther on!"

When you are a gardener, you have no choice but to think in terms

In the process  
of bringing a patch  
of earth to life,  
your life is transformed.

of the future: You have work to do right now (all the time, it seems), but when you love gardening, the whole point becomes the process. The garden may never really be finished. And at the point you think it's done, it's not—because *you've* changed.

#### WALKING IN THE GARDEN

Studies have shown that gardening can lift a person's spirits (gardeners have known this all along). Many nursing homes and hospitals are adding gardens for the residents to work in and/or simply sit in and commune with nature. In George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of*

*the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, he writes, "The best place to seek God is in a garden. You can dig for him there." I think George has a point. There is something so elemental about putting your hands in the dirt.

Another of my very favorite gardening passages, and one that never fails to make me tear up, is from Polly Horvath's *The Canning Season*: "She knew the moment in the morning when you first sank your hands into the soil. She knew

the feeling of the sun-warmed earth, and the cool evening soil and the dry baking soil and the smell of rain on it. It was like putting your hand on the heart of the earth. It was like putting your hand on your own heart."

And, at the end of the day, especially at the end of a long day of gardening, there is absolutely nothing more wonderful than "walking in the garden in the evening breeze," as God did in Genesis 3:8.

Sometimes the hardest part about gardening is making the time to take that walk, or maybe just that breather on the deck, to enjoy God's beautiful creation, and thank God for the privilege of helping to care for it. ☺

**Sandra Paulson** gardens in Moorhead, Minn., where she lives with her husband and daughter. She works at Concordia College and writes a gardening blog ([thedirtareavoices.com](http://thedirtareavoices.com)) in her spare time.



FAMILY MATTERS

## Blessed Earth

by Elyse Nelson Winger

"how calmly,  
as if it were an ordinary thing,  
we eat the blessed earth."

(from the poem "Beans Green  
and Yellow" by Mary Oliver)

## Summertime through

September, most Saturday mornings begin like this: "When are we meeting the O'Sullivans at the farmer's market?" And most Saturdays, it feels great to respond: "As soon as I drink this coffee."

By mid-morning, we're on our way downtown, where bluegrass music beckons, local food abounds, and great friends await. When they see their friends, Catherine and Daniel are off, dollars in their pockets, the balloon man to find. The next time I see them, they're showing off butterfly bracelets or swashbuckling with inflatable swords, working up an appetite for the chocolate croissants just a few food booths away.

By this time, I have seen at least a dozen friends or co-workers or once-congregants, and I am filling my cloth bag with the day's delights. One morning, it's swiss chard because this time I am going to make that African peanut stew I marked in my *Moosewood* cookbook 15 years ago. Another morning, it's pie-perfect peaches because that fruit is my purest connection to a grandma who taught me to bake pie on hot southern Illinois afternoons. Every morning, it's farm eggs, organic goat cheese, and a chewy baguette.

And even after the food shopping is done, the morning at the farmer's market is not over. There's music to be heard, more coffee to be sipped. Only then do we make our way home, lugging that cloth bag filled with food born of the land, bought amidst community, and bound for our family table.

Contrast that with many of my winntertime shopping excursions: late-night sordid affairs wandering the aisles of the store on Main, leaning on the shopping cart like it was a prosthetic limb, gazing at jars of peanut butter, then returning home only to remember that these 27 bags need to be unloaded right now because the ice cream I bought two-for-one will melt. Such grocery trips yield food for our table, but little of it is born of the local land, and if there is community at the grocery after a long day's work, I am too bleary-eyed to notice.

Feeding our families is everyday work and can feel like a part of the daily grind. But it's also a spiritual practice that can become an act of justice. Thanks to a growing local food movement within my community and my own evolving eco-justice commitments, I am now working on steps to bring that Saturday morning market joy into the way I always shop and prepare food. And I believe it starts with spirituality and the family table...

...except that trying to teach our children Jean Berger's "The Eyes of All Wait Upon Thee," a musical rendition of Psalm 104:27-28, is a bit of a leap. Stewart and I somehow decided that this was a natural progression from months of singing the preschool-level "It's Good to Give Thanks for Our Food (clap clap)."

"The Eyes of All" is an achingly beautiful song and it was also Luther's mealtime prayer! But as soon as Catherine and Daniel heard the first "thee," they were skeptical. We sang it through, lamented our judgment, and then settled

or a spoken call-and-response of the text: *The eyes of all wait upon thee, and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.* Despite our musical failure, these are words I want our children to absorb, for the psalmist's praise is where eating as both a spiritual practice and act of justice begins.

When we eat, we are part of a global community of all living things, abundantly blessed by a Creator whose intention is enough for all. The poetry of Psalm 104 proclaims that food isn't just fuel: It is a sign of our intended connectedness to and reverence for one another. Psalm 104 is also a reminder that this intended way of receiving and revering is completely broken. The earth is battered by our careless use of it. Families go hungry in every nation, every night.

Other people grow obese, ironically due to poverty and to what journalist Michael Pollan calls "edible foodlike substances" that are born of things like highly processed high-fructose corn syrup. Enter in the need for justice. And enter in table blessings in simpler settings to begin making this clear to my children. That's step one.

Now, before I continue with these steps, I must confess that I hate columns that give me steps about how to improve my family life. And I am hesitant to

even offer ideas, fearing that many of you dear readers will sigh and think: "Been there, done that. Is she really that behind the times?" But this is where I am at. So here are my not-groundbreaking steps, offered for a renewed way of eating and earthkeeping that is about justice and joy.

**LEARN TOGETHER.** I love the growing collection of children and family books about food justice and ecological awareness, especially Pollan's *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*. For me, it's an engaging, illustrated primer on how to return to our proper place within the web of creation with reverence and respect. I'm already thinking about how to use these rules for a different, less violent kind of hunger game...

**START A COMPOST BIN.** Not only will this fulfill children's gross-out quotient, it is also living, smelling proof that "we are dust and to dust we shall return." Composting also makes us think about trash and how much of it we produce.

**WORK IN A COMMUNITY GARDEN.** I'm all for backyard gardens, but my



un-green thumb means that I need help understanding how to make things grow. Community gardens make friends of strangers, are living laboratories for food justice, and let kids delight in getting dirty.

**MAKE THEM COOK.** While this gets to the heart of my own control issues, it's time to bring Catherine and Daniel into the process of shopping for and preparing food. (I don't mean every meal; how about once a week?) They can still visit the balloon man, but they will also be selecting from this season's local harvest on Saturday mornings so we can cook their creations together.

**INVITE TABLE TALK.** Spend time actually speaking to one another at dinner, instead of just shoveling food. I regret to say that we do too much of the latter, especially Monday-Friday. Katie and Martin Luther's practice of real conversation on matters theological and more is always worth retrieving. Talk about where your dinner comes from, remembering that it—and we—all come from the "blessed earth." And talk about how we can make Psalm 104 more truly a sign of our connectedness to every living thing. ☺

**The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger**, an ELCA pastor, serves as university chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel, who are in the delightful elementary-school years.

A mother and her children receive quilts and kits during Afghanistan's worst winter in 30 years.



A MISSION OF

# WARMTH AND HOPE

by Melanie W. Gibbons

## A MOTHER IN A COLD, FORGOTTEN CORNER OF AFGHANISTAN STRUGGLES TO KEEP HER SMALL CHILD WARM AT NIGHT.

A father, displaced by conflict, worries about keeping his young daughter safe. Residents of a care facility in Sierra Leone struggle to make do with severely limited resources.

A group of youth gathers to learn quilt blocking in the fellowship hall of New Hope Lutheran Church in Columbia, Md. A group of faithful women meet, as they do every week, in the basement of First Lutheran Church in Albert Lea,

Minn. Inmates come together in a sterile, concrete room at a county prison to help piece quilt tops.

What do these people have in common? At first you might think those in the second paragraph are the givers and those in the first the receivers, but consider this: In the giving and receiving of a Lutheran World Relief (LWR) mission quilt, there are many blessings. From the person who cuts the fabric, to

the one who donates loose change to send the quilt, to the hands that deliver it, to the person who receives it, God is in each and every step, encouraging us and bringing us together.

For more than a quarter century, LWR and Women of the ELCA have worked together to uplift and encourage Lutherans and our brothers and sisters in need overseas. As Women of the ELCA prepares to

celebrate 25 years of ministry, LWR is also on the verge of something big. Our goal: to gather 500,000 mission quilts in 2013!

### The 2013 LWR Quilt Campaign

Each year, dedicated quilters across the United States donate an average of 400,000 mission quilts to LWR. These beautiful gifts of hearts and hands are the most requested by our partners overseas, but each year, there are some partners whose requests we cannot meet.

The quilts distributed around the world make a very real difference in the lives of those who receive them. They provide warmth in the form of bedding, shelter in the form of a roof, privacy in the form of a door. They serve as a tangible reminder of God's presence and love. They encourage those who feel forgotten, and provide a sense of hope.

By collecting 500,000 quilts through The 2013 LWR Quilt Campaign, LWR will be able to reach further than ever before with this warm expression of comfort and care.

Here are just a few of the things we can do with this abundance of quilts.

**Temporary Shelter.** In Thailand, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) serves more than 137,000 refugees in nine camps all along the border between Thailand

and Burma/Myanmar. The first refugees arrived in 1984, after fleeing ethnic violence in Burma. Their stay was not expected to last long, reflected in the name given one of the camps, Tham Hin, which translates "temporary shelter."

Some 28 years later, 12 organizations from 10 countries work together to manage the camps, serving refugees inside and outside the camp boundaries as well as Thai citizens affected by the influx of refugees over the years.

Funding cuts to TBBC programs mean that their staff must prioritize spending for one essential over another. For nearly two decades, LWR has partnered with TBBC by providing mission quilts to help offset the need for bedding supplies, especially important in the mountainous winter climate in the camps. Additional quilts from the 2013 Mission Quilt Campaign will help ensure that TBBC has enough to keep even more of those in their care warm.

**Warmth & Comfort.** Across Tanzania, churches work together to respond to people in need through the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT). From poverty to health care to emergency response, CCT equips local congregations with the resources to be Christ's hands in action.

LWR has partnered with CCT for more than a decade to provide

### HOW WILL WE REACH OUR GOAL?

LWR's goal is to collect 500,000 mission quilts between January and December 2013. Set a goal of your own, and tell us about it.

**Set a goal.** Visit [lwr.org/quiltcampaign](http://lwr.org/quiltcampaign) and tell us about your plan.

**Make mission quilts.** Review the steps for making a mission quilt at [lwr.org/quiltcampaign](http://lwr.org/quiltcampaign). You can also call 800-597-5972 to request a copy of the Quilt & Kit Ministry Guide, which includes these instructions.

**Send your quilts to LWR.** Ninety percent of LWR's quilts and kits are collected at annual ingatherings—or local collections—that take place once or twice each year. Visit our website at [ingathering.lwr.org](http://ingathering.lwr.org) to find the one closest to you. Working through the ingathering is the most cost-effective way to send your quilts to LWR, and as a bonus, you get to meet other quilters and kit-makers in your area when you drop off your boxes at the truck. If you don't live close to an ingathering or to one of LWR's warehouses, consider working with your synodical women's organization to set up a special ingathering at your annual convention. Call us at 800-597-5972 to learn more about the logistics of setting this up.

**Tell us about it.** Visit [lwr.org/quiltcampaign](http://lwr.org/quiltcampaign) to share your goals, stories, photos and successes.

basic resources to the people CCT serves. Quilts bring warmth, comfort, and hope to people who may feel forgotten by their families and communities.

In meeting this basic need, family income is freed up for other important expenses like food, medicine, and school fees. Additional quilts will allow CCT to warm many more bodies and spirits.

#### How can you help?

If you're already quilting for LWR, thank you! Throughout LWR's history, you have helped us serve millions of people in need around the world. Challenge your quilting group to make five, 10, or 20 more quilts this year as part of the campaign. In honor of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Women of the ELCA, why not make 25 more quilts—or 25 percent more.

**Invite others to join.** If you already have an LWR quilting ministry invite others to join.

Get members and neighbors who don't quilt to help you meet your goal by donating supplies or offering up donations to the quilt and kit shipping fund.

Host a community quilting day each month in 2013 and invite novices to participate. Let friends, family, and neighbors know that if they can tie a knot, they can make an LWR quilt.

Don't forget the little ones: make family-friendly stations and include the pint-sized servant leaders in your midst.

**What if you've never quilted before?** The 2013 LWR Quilt Campaign is a great time to start. Don't be intimidated! Mission quilts are not the same as those hand-stitched heirloom quilts your grandmother made. Some people refer to LWR's style of quilts as "comforts"—simple, warm layers, tied together for strength.

An LWR quilt can be as basic as two large pieces of cloth with a warm filler in the middle. Or you can use a template and cut out squares. LWR provides simple instructions for completing a mission quilt in just three easy steps! Visit [lwr.org/quiltcampaign](http://lwr.org/quiltcampaign) to learn more.

**If quilting for LWR is new to you ... quilting is made for fellowship.**

Quilt in groups—it's much more fun, and you can learn from each other while sharing the work!

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Lutheran World Relief is thrilled to partner with Women of the ELCA on this project. As you finish out your 2012 quilting projects and begin planning for 2013, take this quilting project into account. Talk to your friends, neighbors, and family and set your own goal for the 2013 LWR Mission Quilt Campaign.

Tell us what you're planning to do at [lwr.org/quiltcampaign](http://lwr.org/quiltcampaign). Together, we can bring comfort and hope to our neighbors around the world. 

**Melanie W. Gibbons** is quilt and kit ministry coordinator at Lutheran World Relief.

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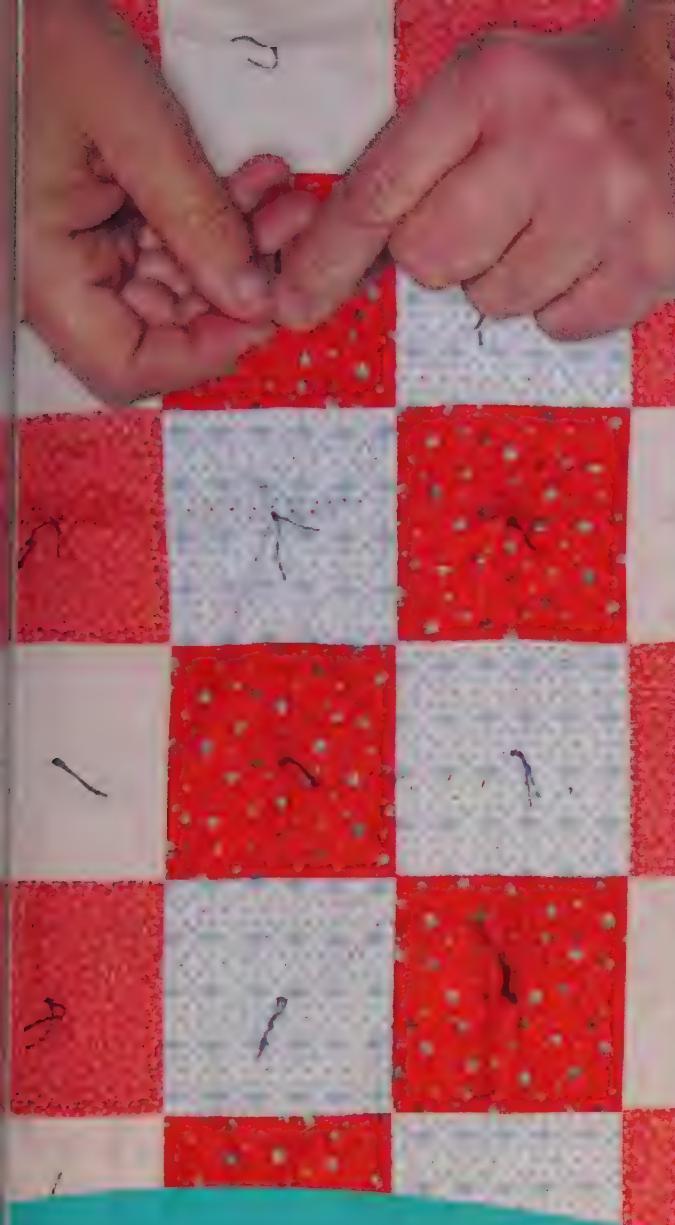
- > Quilt & Kit Ministry Guide
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Visit [lwr.org/quiltcampaign](http://lwr.org/quiltcampaign) to download:

- > 2013 Quilt Campaign Leaders' Guide
- > Instructions for making a mission quilt
- > Tips for alternative quilt filler
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*Trish Williams, Women of the ELCA Triennial quilting project coordinator.*



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# EXPERIENCING GOD

by Megan Torgerson

**“WHERE IS GOD IN THIS?”** This common question used in spiritual reflection makes us look at the world around us, with all its chaos, frustration, joys, and happy accidents, and claim the places that God’s presence is truly manifest. As people of faith, we claim a God that creates, loves, redeems, and dwells in and through the fullness of this world and our lives.

Our claims and our experiences might not always line up, however. All too easily, we assume a lack of God’s presence and find ourselves feeling dis-

tant and attention-starved. If we never look for God, we’ll never learn to recognize God’s presence even as we’re surrounded by it. With blinders on, we shut out the awareness of what God might be doing in our lives, leaving us less attuned to God’s presence.

The more we ask ourselves where God is in every event, experience, and person, the more we see the richness of God’s presence in our lives. But we have to start somewhere, training ourselves to name and claim God’s presence when we see it. So, let’s begin with a good, old-fashioned pop quiz.

Where do we reliably experience the true presence of God?

- A. In Scripture
- B. In community
- C. In suffering
- D. All the above
- E. None of the above

Let's be honest: There's a given staring us in the face with option A, right? As Christians, we confess that the Bible is God's word given to us, and in its pages God is made known. We trust that the stories of God's people throughout history help us better understand ourselves and our God. If we lamented a lack of God's presence and confusion about where God can be found, Scripture might be the place we would go. The Bible is God's presence, and we find the fullness of God in its words.

I read a book recently where the author claimed that the Bible is the only place a person could know God's presence, and that any other style of inspiration or conversation invited confusion and deceit. If you could not find God's presence in the Bible, you weren't looking hard enough, the author said. I respected this opinion in theory, as it truly reclaims God's word as revelatory of God's nature. But it did not feel complete. The presence of God is bigger than the Bible. Scripture is not the only way to encounter God's presence in meaningful ways.

### GOD'S PRESENCE IN WORSHIP AND SERVICE

When we gather in worship or for service, we experience community and God's activity in it. Just as God has been present throughout history in the voices of prophets, preachers, and poets, God is present today in the gathering of God's own people. Perhaps you have felt something big, something amazing, while gathered in community. Whether in worship or service, with family or strangers, in your hometown or on the other side of the world, you have experienced the way God is

present wherever two or three are gathered. The power of God's presence is magnified by sharing the world with others. When you give of yourself to others in intentional ways so that the whole may be greater than the parts, you experience the presence of God.

As we look back to our quiz, options A and B seem to make sense. But perhaps you need convincing to accept option C as a way to encounter God's presence.

### GOD IN SUFFERING?

Isn't suffering effectively the absence of God, the painful gap between our hurts and God's intervention? It might feel counter-intuitive to claim God's presence in the depths of illness, loss, and fear. However, that's exactly the confidence we have. I firmly believe that God is never more present in our lives than when we suffer. Our God knows pain and death intimately in the person of Jesus Christ, and God promises to be with us even in our hurt. This is no remote, uncaring deity who hangs us out to dry. Check out Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 1, and see that God's presence surrounds us powerfully in our suffering.

God is present in Scripture, in community, and in suffering. It is here—in these three places—that we are most equipped to answer the question, "Where is God in this?" God is in the power of the word, revealing God's own knowledge and presence to us. God is in the beauty of community, multiplying love and service. God is in the depths of despair, holding us close even as we hurt.

But going back to our quiz, the answer still isn't quite right. I suspect many of you have found times and places where you knew you were in the presence of God, but it didn't fit these definitions. That makes both options D and E right, too. God is in all these things, and in none of these things.

Slowly, we begin to realize just how unpredictable and universal our experience of God can be. Our own expectations of God's presence can not prescribe

God's appearances. While we can expect God's presence sometimes, there are times it will simply surprise and bewilder us. This is what makes the experience of God's presence so delightful. This is why we can each give authentically, wildly different answers when we ask each other what the presence of God is like.

### HOLY SPIRIT SHIVERS

My parish nurse refers to the unexpected presence of God as "the Holy Spirit shivers"—the chills she gets when something falls into place. The hairs on her arms stand up as we discuss the right words from the right person at the right time, or a miraculous healing event, or the just-in-time arrival of a beautiful prayer shawl for someone who needed it. In these moments, we feel God's presence so palpably that we get goose bumps. This is what God's presence is like: an ethereal, almost eerie fulfillment in things big and small, demonstrating the very real closeness of our God.

On Facebook, a few members of my church were commenting on each others' sunset photos. One man referred us to an entire album of beautiful pictures from his recent family trip. "I see God in these pictures," he said. In the rich colors, peaceful waters, and smiling children, I, too, could experience God's presence. Even vicariously, the wonder of creation revealed the truth of our Creator's vibrant engagement with plants, animals, and all natural elements.

For many people, the beauty of nature inspires a deep awareness of God's presence, surrounding us like a cool breeze or warm sunshine. This is what God's presence is like: the lilies of the field, clothed in splendor, testifying to the God who made us all.

During a recent college search, a young man in our youth group spoke with a representative of an area college. The recruiter asked him what brought him to that particular school. The student shrugged and said, "The Holy Spirit, I think." He could not have been more right. In the midst of the dance where our gifts

and skills create art with the needs of our world, God is present.

When we consider the way we can be best used in the world, serving and learning and working alongside our sisters and brothers, living into the fullness of who God made us to be, God is present. This is what God's presence is like: the meeting of self and community in a perfect blend of needs, wants, abilities, and dreams.

### GOD IS PRESENT

We do not achieve closeness with God by trying to force God into our experience. Rather, our experience of God relies on two truths: God is present, and God will continue to be present. This brings us back to our original question: Where is God in this? If you want to know what God's presence is like, I challenge you to ask yourself that question every day. Reflect on the events of your day, whether good or bad, mundane or extraordinary, difficult or simple, and ask yourself where God's actions were most revealed.

Take the question of God's presence one step further and ask what God's presence is like. When we say, "God's presence is like..." and fill in the blank, we testify to the God we worship, and we share that faith with others. We begin to realize that God is for all.

Invite others into the conversation and celebrate what God has done in our lives and listen for what God will do next. Recognize the wideness of our God who can be revealed in Scripture, community, suffering, opportunity, creation, vocation, and other areas yet to be discovered.

When we know God more and more deeply, God is made known to us and through us. This is the richness of life in which we gather. Truly, God is here now. 

**The Rev. Megan Torgerson** serves at Augustana Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, Minn. She has contributed to several Augsburg Fortress publications, including *Crazy Talk* and the *Spark Study Bible*, and preached at the 2011 Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering in Spokane. She lives with her husband, two dogs, two cats, and an abundance of lint rollers.



LET US PRAY

## Gatherings

by Julie K. Aageson

Here we are again—gathering together to begin a new school year and a new season for *Gather*. Women are particularly good at gathering. Just last evening, I met with dear friends with whom I gather regularly. This “covenant group” began with six of us who wanted to share our lives, as much wisdom as we could muster, and the pleasure of one another’s company.

Two constants in our gathering are a time of silence at the beginning, and the beautiful words from “Night Prayer” (*New Zealand Prayer Book*) at the closing: *The angels of God guard us through the night and quiet the powers of darkness... We have wounded your love. O God, heal us. We stumble in the darkness. Light of the World transfigure us. We forget that we are your home. Spirit of God, dwell in us...*

Over the years, we’ve said wrenching farewells to two beloved friends who died way too soon and to three who moved away. Two more friends became part of the circle and the three of us who now are left rarely meet without knowing the presence of the others. Their voices, their laughter, their unique ways of looking at the world continue to be part of our evening gathering.

Last night we sent our resident scientist off on a journey overseas where she’ll do research in her field of biology. We surrounded her with prayers for safe travel and successful discoveries. We will feel her presence even in her absence.

As I write, I feel the presence of so many of you. I hear the beautiful accent of the woman at Anacortes

Lutheran Church who helped serve at my parents’ funerals over a year ago: “Write us another ar-ti-ble,” she said. I hear the voices of others who write for this magazine. And I hear words from many of you who’ve been kind enough to connect, whose encouragement helps me write more clearly. Each time I sit down to write, I gather with you. You are Christ’s presence to me.

In July, our family gathered on the Oregon coast. We gathered—our daughters and their families, my siblings and their families and all eight babies!—to remind one another that we belong to each other. We gathered to celebrate new life and to mourn lives that are lost to us now. We gathered because we are bound together by love and grief and joy and sorrow. We gathered to remember why our belonging to one another matters so much.

As we gather together here over the course of this next year, we are in Christ’s presence. Because of Christ’s presence, we also are present to one another, a gathering that includes the whole body of Christ.

*Be present, Spirit of God, within us, your dwelling place and home, that this house may be one where all darkness is penetrated by your light, all troubles calmed by your peace, all evil redeemed by your love, all pain transformed in your suffering, and all dying glorified in your risen life. Amen. (“Night Prayer”)*

**Julie K. Aageson** is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.



HEALTH WISE

## Older—and Better

by Molly M. Ginty

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls.

Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.

### Ninety-two-year-old

Bernice Bates, the world's oldest yoga instructor, begins each day in Pinellas Park, Fla., with a stretching routine to which she attributes her longevity, her mobility—and her robust health.

John Lowe, also 92, slips on black leg warmers and matching ballet shoes to rehearse for a dance performance in Cambridgeshire, England. A grandfather of 11 who also roller-skates and does trapeze tricks, Lowe took up ballet at age 79 and hasn't stopped since.

Fauja Singh, 101, pounds the London pavement in baggy blue sweatpants as he gears up for his next race. A native of India known as the "turbaned torpedo," Singh wears a saffron-colored headdress while running marathons and leaving younger competitors in his dust.

Stories of geriatric feats such as these may soon become more common. The number of people who reach age 100 has increased 300-fold in the past century. And as a flood of Baby Boomers are entering retirement, American life expectancy is hitting an all-time high of 80 years for women and 75 for men. Enter cutting-edge strategies that are enabling scientists to slow or reverse the aging process—and allowing people to live disease-free well into their golden years. In September or Healthy Aging Month, here's how these sci-fi developments could change your future—and that of the generations come.

Unlike cosmetic changes wrought by plastic surgery or Botox injections, the latest scientific health interventions make

people younger not from the outside in, but from the inside out. "We have personalized medicine or the ability to tailor pharmaceuticals to an individual's genome," says Sonia Arrison, the San Francisco-based author of *100 Plus: How the Coming Age of Longevity Will Change Everything*. "There is tissue engineering—the ability to grow new organs in the lab out of a person's own cells. And there is gene therapy—the ability to rewrite an individual's genome in order to correct mutations that cause disease and ill health."

As they study the hundreds of genetic factors that contribute to longevity, scientists hope that unlocking our genes' secrets will help us live longer and better. "Lifespan isn't our biggest target here," says Dr. James Kirkland, director of the center on aging at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. "Instead, it's health span—feeling your best for as much of your life as possible while preserving your independence and freedom."

Kirkland and his team are developing drugs that can reverse the effects of "senescent" cells: deadbeat cells that accumulate in the body over time, that neither die nor continue to multiply, and that contribute to age-related disease.

In the next 15 years, there may be medications to block the effects of senescent cells, and within the next 20 years, there may be drugs to destroy them altogether. "This could slow or even reverse age-related decline," says Kirkland. "And because chronic age-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease,

and diabetes are the biggest drivers of health-care costs, this would not only benefit older people, but society as a whole."

While Kirkland and his team battle deadbeat cells, scientists worldwide are contributing other discoveries to the anti-aging field. Experts at Kyushu University at Fukuoka, Japan, have trained dogs to detect the smell of cancer, while those at the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa have developed a nano-particle sensor or "electronic nose" that detects cancer, too. Researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, have created a computer program that predicts drugs' side effects before drugs are taken, making new prescriptions safer for older people who need them regularly. Scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, have found a way to regenerate nasal sensors after old age has robbed people of smell, a problem that can make seniors lose interest in food and lead to malnourishment.

On top of these developments come anti-aging strategies that we can take on our own: loading up on fruits and vegetables that are rich in resveratrol and other antioxidants (proven to ward off cancer and stroke);

doing resistance training (shown to reverse aging in muscles); getting 15 minutes of aerobic exercise daily (which can extend the lifespan an estimated three years); and lowering calorie intake (which you should cut down as you age and your body needs less fuel).

Some fountain-of-youth seekers are so impressed by the research on this last point that they dutifully follow what is called a "calorie restriction" diet: avoiding foods high in sugar, starch, and fat while slashing calories by at least 10 percent of normal intake. Such a diet has been scientifically proven to lengthen the lifespan while boosting memory, minimizing medication use, and warding off arthritis, diabetes, heart problems, and Alzheimer's disease.

If people take personal steps such as these—and if they take advantage of the latest scientific breakthroughs—the average human lifespan could well reach 150 years, predicts Arison.

If 75 becomes the new 35, will overpopulation be a problem? Demographers say that because birth rates are falling, the global population could very well remain steady. What about the economic burden of this change? Studies out of Yale, Harvard, and the Rand Corporation show that as societies become longer-lived and healthier, it actually generates wealth in the form of "silver markets." One person's longevity thus becomes another person's asset or income.

"In the future, 'old' could be more of a high-status term, since it won't be associated with illness and may come to be associated with experience and wisdom," says Arison. "Aging will likely still keep its basic meaning. But it won't be seen as the threat it is by some today."

**Molly M. Ginty** (<http://mollymaureen-ginty.wordpress.com>) lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in *Women's eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms.*



#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

*The World Future Society*

[www.wfs.org](http://www.wfs.org)

*Calorie Restriction Society*

[www.calorierestriction.org](http://www.calorierestriction.org)

HOW WE LIVE, AND WHAT WE CHOOSE  
TO DO AND SAY ...

MATTERS AND MAKES A DIFFERENCE  
IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS.



JESUS SAYS, “GO!”

by Myrna Shee

From our first breath to our last, relationships surround us. First, a family. Then neighbors and friends, teachers and schoolmates. Boyfriends, girlfriends, and spouses. Co-workers and bosses. Pastors and church members. Joan Chittister writes in *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully*, “At its core, life is not about things, it is about relationships.... [They] show us the face of God on Earth.”

Each day, our lives touch dozens of others and leave countless marks for good or ill. Theologian Elton Trueblood wrote in *The Incendiary Fellowship*, “Close contact with redeemed people makes us both weep and shout for joy, and do both at the same time.” We may be blessed or wounded by our encounters with others, for our lives are shaped by those who love us and by those who don’t, by those who forgive us and those who don’t.

Over the years, conflict leads to hurtful words, tears in the night, and, sometimes, relationships that remain painful. Conflict, however, may also lead to restored relationships, either through our actions or those of others.

How we live, and what we choose to do and say matters and makes a difference in the lives of others. As leadership consultant John Gardner wrote in *On Leadership*, “It is a curious fact that from infancy on we accumulate an extensive knowledge of the effect others have on us, but we are far into adulthood before we begin to comprehend the impact we have on others.”

### A TRUE STORY

The story that follows was published in 1985 in a book of devotions for youth written by youth, but it is timeless and ageless.

*Our youth group sat in a circle, feet bare, trying not to laugh. “I want you to wash the feet of the people here whom you need to forgive or be forgiven by,” our pastor had just said.*

*Teresa went first. She washed everyone’s feet. No one really liked her, and I had led the group in teasing her. When she got to me, I realized she had every right to hate me and not wash my feet. But she washed them very carefully. She was forgiving me!*

*When it was my turn to wash, I washed Teresa’s feet. No one else’s. I wanted to show her I’d understood. She smiled. I’d never tease her again (“Teresa,” *FaithPrints: Youth Devotions for Every Day of the Year*; Augsburg Publishing House).*

Just as I recognize myself in this moving story, I suspect you do, too: Some of us are Teresa; some are the storyteller. We understand the story, feel it, and welcome the simple story of two young women who—without a word—confess, forgive, and reconcile.

Healing in this story is possible because both young women show courage. Teresa makes herself vulnerable to those who have taunted her. The storyteller understands Teresa’s message of forgiveness, accepts it, and then reciprocates by washing only Teresa’s feet. Teresa smiles and the storyteller stops teasing. We respond with hope and joy, welcoming the power of Teresa’s story to inspire us.

### JESUS SAYS, “GO!”

In this month’s Bible study session, Jesus outlines steps toward reconciliation in Matthew 18. Although we know that the steps are wise, loving, and unifying, we also know they are not easy for us. For one thing, the world around us encourages the opposite. We hear judgmental characterizations of people on radio, television, and the Internet. Cynical greeting cards seem to be humorous, but are hurtful; for example, “I can’t wait to see you again … so we can talk about other people.” News broadcasts are filled with depressing stories of violence, which are trivialized by commercials that promise easy solutions to life’s problems.

In the midst of this polarized and divisive world, Jesus offers us a straightforward step toward healing: “If another…sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (Matthew 18:15). Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 are both more clear and more urgent: “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

Even though Jesus expects us to go, we resist. We feel intimidated and vulnerable. We wait, hop-

ing that tensions will ease and conflicts disappear. At such times—especially when the situation seems hopeless—we can only trust that God will be with us. In the midst of our anxiety, Jesus breathes hope into us with his words, “Peace be with you.” And then he sends us out with his clear priority: Address the conflict with the other person.

As we go, his promise to be present gives us strength. Even in the most difficult situations, we remember that the Holy Spirit will work through us as surely as the Spirit worked through Teresa and the storyteller.

#### GOD'S STURDY PRESENCE

God has been present in the relationships of my life: sticky and not-so-sticky, loving and not-so-loving, gentle and fraught. Early in my working life, a painful rift with a colleague created tension for both of us. I suggested that we meet. The conversation was difficult as we confronted the rift, but it led to a fragile reconciliation that enabled us to continue our shared work. Although our relationship never regained its former ease, gradual healing followed.

At another time, our family had a difficult time. Late one night, I wrote the following prayer-conversation in my journal:

*I long for a sense of hope, a sense that someone is pulling with us.*

*God, I know you're there. Please be with all of us. Bring us hope. Bring us peace. Bring us YOU.*

*I know. The answer is in the request. You have already brought hope and peace. You are already here. Thank you.*

God was with us as we found our way. Prayer oriented us, friends and professionals helped us, and deep conversation and shared problem solving healed us.

#### INSIGHTS FROM GOD'S PEOPLE

In seeking to follow Jesus' guidance, we have the opportunity to learn and grow. For me, talking directly

with the person involved has been rewarding more often than not. I have sought to acknowledge my part in conflicts, seek—and then receive—forgiveness, accept my own faults and those of others, and then go on. God's people—saints and sinners all—have provided insights for my journey and for yours. Those that follow are some that have been helpful to me.

**Look again.** Gerhard Frost, Lutheran poet, pastor, and teacher wrote:

*If you would live creatively,  
look again at what God  
has placed before you  
but you have never fully seen:  
a place, a situation, an idea,  
a person, a face—especially the face  
of one you love or hate,  
of one you take for granted or ignore,  
or one prejudged and now avoided.  
There never was a human face  
that wasn't worth another look.*

(*Seasons of a Lifetime;*  
Augsburg Publishing House)

**Listen.** The stories other people tell open not only my mind, but my eyes and heart as well. When I listen deeply with the intention to really hear another person, I show respect for the person and his or her experience. In one of his prayer-poems, Ted Loder wrote:

*Help my unbelief  
that I may have courage  
to dare to love the enemies  
I have the integrity to make;  
to care for little else  
save my brothers and sisters of the human family:  
to take time to be truly with them,  
take time to see,  
take time to speak,  
take time to learn with them*

*before time takes us;  
and to fear failure and death less  
than the faithlessness  
of not embracing love's risks.*

(*Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*;  
Innisfree Press, Inc., 1984)

**Talk to God in prayer.** When we pray, we reflect both our personalities and the realities of our lives. In the midst of challenging and difficult relationships, we know that God will hear our prayers and be present with us. Our prayers join those of others, including even those with whom we struggle, and may take the form of lament. Diane Jacobson, biblical scholar and teacher, provides insights that guide us as we pray (“Lament as True Prayer,” *The Lutheran magazine*, July 2005);

- To lament is to be faithful. The lament, more than any other form of prayer, speaks directly to God of the reality of suffering.
- We come to God not by denying the truth of our experience in the world but by embracing it fully.
- When our theology is rooted in the cross, we call things what they are. And we find God and God’s truth hidden in places we least expect. The power of the lament is this: We come to God boldly, directly, defenses stripped away, with nothing standing between us and the Almighty.
- God meets us there.

**Write it down!** My journal, which is marked by long silences and occasional entries, helps me find focus and direction. The entries are mostly prayer conversations with God, reminding me of what I’ve learned, the promises I’ve made, God’s sturdy presence in my life, and my continuing journey.

**Follow Jesus.** When Jesus says, “Go,” we have a choice to make. When we choose to follow our own instincts and take a different path, we wander on our own. We

discover little peace in the midst of conflict when we complain, gossip, manipulate, turn others against the person, or isolate ourselves. Jesus is clear: in difficult situations, our priority is to tend to the relationship. As he says in Matthew 5, “First be reconciled to your brother or sister...” Jesus tells us to get our priorities straight and confront the conflict directly. As we do, Jesus promises to be with us.

**Use your gifts.** Sometimes we lose sight of the gifts God has given us. I am grateful for my family and friends for loving me and reminding me of whom I am and the gifts I bring to them and to the world. I am thankful for my pastors (past and present) and congregation for nourishing my faith and for reminding me of the calling embodied in the service of baptism, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

In a sermon at the 2011 Women of the ELCA triennial convention in Spokane, Wash., Bishop Jessica Crist of the Montana Synod quoted a message from her mother, Christine, the first director of the ELCA’s Commission for Women. Her words remind us of the important role God has given us as brothers and sisters in the church:

- Keep on doing what you’re doing. It matters.
- Keep on being who you are. It matters.
- If you see something that needs to be said, say it. It matters.

**Go with God’s blessing.** “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Numbers 6:23–26). ☩

**Myrna Sheie**, a former teacher, served on the staff of the Saint Paul Area Synod (1988–1998) and the ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop (1998–2011). She and her husband, Steve, are retired, live in Portland, Ore., and enjoy spending time with their twin grandsons.

# Matthew

A 'NUMBERS GUY' EVANGELIST *by Heather Hammond*

**A**s a tax specialist, calculations filled his workdays. As an evangelist, Matthew's methodical personality shows between the lines of the gospel attributed to him.

Like accountants and bookkeepers everywhere he focused on practical, measurable things. He gave his account of Jesus like a serious minded revenue agent: sober, concise, foregoing all nonessential detail. This tax collector liked numbers. He used numbers to teach about forgiveness: forgive 70 times seven.

Matthew used an unimaginably large number of gold talents, loaned to a slave, to illustrate the extravagant grace of God. Matthew used numbers and paychecks to show God's shocking generosity. He told Jesus' parable about workers hired intermittently throughout the day, workers who were all paid the same at quitting time.

Now people call him the patron saint of civil servants, but in the first century there could hardly have been a less appealing apostle than Matthew. He was

a tax collector; a profession the Roman civic leader Cicero dubbed the worst of all possible trades. In the Roman Empire taxes were not collected directly from wages. Rather the state leased its tax rights to the highest bidder. The lessee had to assess a high rate of tax in his area if he did not want to come out in the red. Often the price, especially for a large district, was so great that an individual could not assume the responsibility alone. Bidders frequently united and formed companies. They divided their provinces into smaller districts, then sublet their purchased rights to local tax collectors. Matthew was most likely one of these smaller collectors.

#### Gift of Yahweh

Such a system encouraged fraud and extortion by tax collectors. No one fussed over how they collected taxes, or whether they larded the bill with a little extra for themselves or their employers. What was worse,



The feast of St. Matthew falls on September 21, an equinox when day and night add up evenly, 12 hours each. Matthew liked things to add up: He was a tax collector, a keeper of accounts.

tax collectors preyed on their own people in service of the Roman occupying forces. Matthew was a Jew who impoverished his own people on behalf of pagan foreigners. Matthew walked away from his tax tables when Jesus called, but he still had the habit of looking at the world through his financial experience.

Matthew wrote about money or coins a dozen times, six times as often as John. When describing Jesus' infancy, Matthew alone mentioned gold and other valuables. He alone recorded the miraculous finding and payment of the "tribute," using the precise term for the temple tax.

Only Matthew recalls Jesus comparing the kingdom of heaven to treasure hidden in a field. Only Matthew writes that Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to an enormous pearl. In Matthew's telling, Jesus sounds remarkably like an investment counselor: The treasure and the pearl are worth selling absolutely everything to obtain.

Other information about Matthew is scarce. According to the gospels, he was known as Levi when Jesus called him to follow. At some point he acquired the name Matthew, meaning "gift of Yahweh."

The outline of the Gospel of Matthew generally follows the pattern of Mark, but the author of Matthew filled in the gaps with sayings and stories from another source, perhaps an original Aramaic text that has been lost. Scholars disagree whether the apostle Matthew was the same person as the evangelist Matthew.

The gospel itself does not state who wrote it, but the traditional designation "according to Matthew" is very old.

Whoever the author, the Gospel of Matthew addressed a Jewish-Christian community in a Jewish environment. Matthew may have written originally in Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew. Estimates vary, but the writing of this gospel in its present form is often dated to the years 75–90 A.D.

## An eyewitness

Outside the New Testament, the most authoritative reference to Matthew appears in fragments of a work by Papias (born around 70 A.D.), who apparently knew some of the apostles, including Matthew. Papias recalled, “Matthew put together the sayings of the Lord in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could.” The “sayings” refer to the oral traditions concerning Jesus that circulated after his death. Scholars generally agree that “Hebrew,” for Papias, meant Aramaic.

Roughly 50 years later another early church father (Irenaeus) wrote, “Matthew also issued a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome.”

Matthew anchored his witness in passages from the Old Testament in order to establish that Jesus fulfilled God’s promises about the Messiah. *Messiah* is a Hebrew word that means *anointed one* in English, the same as *Christ* in Greek.

Matthew knew the Hebrew scriptures so well that he employed dozens of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. He did that to show how Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection matched the prophecies and qualifications for the long-expected Messiah. The unique emphasis of Matthew’s message is less about the personality of Jesus than the teaching of Jesus, teaching which gave a new and final interpretation to the ancient law of Moses.

One Old Testament quotation, “the stone that the builders rejected (Psalm 118),” had a visible significance for Matthew’s readers. The place where Jesus was crucified was called Golgotha, literally “the place of a skull” (27:33). It was an abandoned stone quarry where the stone used to build the Temple had been cut. In the old quarry was a large, skull-shaped lump of inferior stone that the builders had rejected as unsuitable for building. It suited God’s purposes perfectly. Matthew was an eyewitness to it all.

## Apostle or evangelist?

Tradition holds that after Jesus’ resurrection Matthew served his ministry first in Judaea, and then as a missionary to Ethiopia. Some suppose that at the time of the persecution of Herod Agrippa I (about 42 A.D.), Matthew left the country and travelled to North Africa and possibly Persia, now called Iran. Legends differ as to whether Matthew died a martyr or from natural causes. One legend of martyrdom holds that he was killed with a halberd (a pike fitted with an axe head) on the orders of the king of Ethiopia. A painting called *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (circa 1599) by Italian master Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio may be the most famous artistic interpretation of the legend.

In religious art Matthew’s usual emblem is a man, perhaps because of the unique genealogy he wrote in 1:1–16 showing the human family ties of Jesus. Artists sometimes portray Matthew as an evangelist, sometimes as an apostle. Depicted as the evangelist he sits at his desk, writing his gospel with an angel either guiding his hand or holding the inkwell. Portrayed as an apostle he sometimes holds a money-bag, or a money-box, as a nod to his former profession. In the Middle Ages artists sometimes show Matthew with spectacles, presumably to help him read his account books.

Matthew’s description of Jesus offers more of his teaching about conflict resolution than any other single book of the Bible. Several principles serve to define godly behavior. Resolving anger figures in chapters 5 and 18. Retaliation has no place among the children of God (5:38–42). A step-by-step process for resolving hard feelings, combined with a call to forgiveness, appears in Matthew 18—as well as in many ELCA congregation bylaws.

In Matthew 18 the apostle Peter seems to think forgiving one person seven times is plenty. Jesus adds it up differently. Jesus’ answer (sometimes translated “77” and sometimes “70 times seven”) really means “Just do it!” Don’t calculate, only forgive. If someone is count-

ng how many times she has forgiven another, she has not forgiven, merely extended credit on a debt.

### Follow the money

True to his tax collector past, Matthew's attention follows the money. In Matthew 22:15–22 Jesus' opponents attempt to trick him into advocating tax evasion, a treasonous (and deadly) violation of Roman law. Matthew shows Jesus' formidable intelligence and political skill as he nimbly sidesteps his adversaries. Jesus asked them for a coin. They probably showed him a denar of Tiberius, the Emperor. The Latin inscription read, "Tiberius, son of the God Augustus," and "High Priest." When Jesus told his challengers "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," his hearers understood that the titles Son of God and High Priest properly belonged to Jesus, not Caesar.

Matthew's readers already knew conflict with Rome's Caesar was inevitable: they lived it. Matthew likely wrote for survivors of the "Jewish Wars," a military action by Rome resulting in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and much of the city, in 70 A.D. The terrible destruction at the end of the parable of the wedding banquet (22:1–14) probably hints at the fall of Jerusalem.

The Jewish war lived on in the memory of the survivors, becoming a defining experience. Matthew interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem as the judgment of God. The victorious Roman general was Titus. Romans commemorated the battle with the Arch of Titus, still visible in Rome today. In terrifying times Matthew's readers learned to depend on Jesus.

Life-long learning matches Matthew's vision of discipleship. The word *disciple* comes from a Latin word meaning *learner*. Matthew uses the word *disciple* 73 times, an indication of how important the role of learner is to his understanding of being a Christian. Learning—being a disciple—is how Jesus equips his

people for their great mission: making disciples and baptizing throughout the world.

The life of discipleship, for Lutherans, begins with baptism. A familiar part of the ELCA baptismal liturgy comes from Matthew 5:16. The words spoken to the newly baptized include these: "...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Jesus, as recalled by Matthew, expects a great deal from his disciples. High expectations stand side by side with God's stunning grace and generosity. The sheer force of God's determination to bless the people of earth can seem almost absurd. Consider, for example, the gigantic debt in parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23–35). Hearing it might have made Jesus' hearers gasp or laugh. In the parable a slave borrowed 10,000 talents of gold from his king. Clearly someone forgot to run a credit-check: The slave borrowed more than a typical worker could earn in 150,000 years! One talent was worth more than 15 years wages; the 100 denarii owed by the second slave amounted to about three month's worth. God's extravagant generosity comes with the expectation that disciples will treat others with the same grace they receive. That grace comes through Christ's presence with his people, with you.

You are not alone. Matthew begins and ends with that transforming assurance. Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 7:14) that one day God would be "with us" through an unknown child. In Matthew 1:23 the evangelist links God's promise to its forever fulfillment in Jesus. In Matthew 28:20 readers discover they no longer await "God with us." Instead the risen Christ speaks as God, personally promising "I am with you, always." ♣

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## BIBLE STUDY

## Theme Verse

*"For where two or three are gathered in my name,  
I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20)*

## Opening

Hymn "God is Here!" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 526)

## Overview

From beginning to end, the Bible testifies that the God who gathers is the same God who is present with us. The Gospel of Matthew adds that Jesus himself is "God with us," and promises to be with us always, wherever two or three are gathered, even to the end of the age. This promise of God's presence in Christ is true even in the messy, difficult, or conflicted times we experience among the gathered people of God. No matter the shape of our present situation, God is with us in Christ. And Christ is especially with us when we gather together.

## Gatherings

Have you ever noticed how much gathering takes place in the Bible? God gathers the waters at creation to

# OUR PRESENT, CHRIST'S PRESENCE

by Audrey West

form the land. The Israelites gather manna in the wilderness, shepherds gather their sheep, vineyard owners gather grapes, and kings gather their people. Exiles are gathered from afar when God brings them back to the land. Nations gather for war; the assembly gathers for worship; pilgrims gather for festivals; crowds gather around Jesus; disciples gather for prayer; and whole cities gather to hear prophets, priests, and preachers talk of what God has done, is doing, and will do until the end of time.

Throughout nine sessions together, we will engage in a word study on gathering in order to explore some of the reasons or purposes for which we are "Gathered by God." We are gathered together in the presence of God for rest, for shelter, for life, for *koinonia* (intimate communion),

and for sharing stories that remind us who we are. We are gathered to learn, to be empowered, and to be sent as God's witnesses to a world that was created by God's own gathering hands.

1. What one or two things do you hope to gain from your participation in this Bible study? This might include something you hope to learn, experiences you hope to have, questions you hope might be answered (or asked), relationships you hope to develop, or anything else that motivates you to be a part of this study.

Genesis, the first book in the Bible, contains the first explicit reference to the gathering activity of God. It happens on the third day of Creation, after God has brought forth light (the first day) and made the sky (second day). Revelation, the last book in the Bible, concludes with another sort of gathering. This time God is joined by Jesus Christ, who is depicted metaphorically as a Lamb. Although the word *gather* does not appear there, the picture painted by

he words suggests the ultimate Gathering: an invitation to enter into the New Creation, the event that stands as the end of all things.

## 2. READ ALOUD GENESIS 1:9–13 AND REVELATION

**22:1–5, 16–17.** As you read, picture in your mind the images that are conveyed in these texts. Which images stand out the most for you? What similarities or connections do you notice between the passages?

Water, trees, fruit, life: God's first act of gathering draws together the waters and creates the lands and seas that will eventually support all living things, including the fruit trees "that bear fruit with the seed in it." These are the waters of life, and they appear again in Revelation, flowing "from the throne of God and the Lamb," where they support the "tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit producing its fruit each month..." Jesus, the Lamb, gathers the people from everywhere as he calls out, "Let everyone who is thirsty, come!"

Although Genesis and Revelation were originally written for communities of faith in very different circumstances, and they envision events that are nearly an eternity apart from one another, they continue to speak today through the power of God's Spirit.

From beginning to end—from Genesis to Revelation—the Bible affirms this: In the beginning, God gathers the waters to give life to the people. In the end, God gathers the people to give the waters of life.

3. How do these passages from Genesis and Revelation speak to you about who God is? What do you learn, know, experience, or feel about God as you hear or see these descriptions and words?

What images of God do they form in your mind's eye?

## Images of God

It turns out that God's gathering activity is not the only thread that ties together Genesis and Revelation. Another thread running through the Bible is the enduring presence of God. The earliest claims of Scripture paint a picture of God as an active Creator who is engaged with the whole of creation from the beginning to the end of time.

In the beginning, God brings order out of swirly, watery chaos by the power of God's own word. God breathes "light" and it is so. God calls "sky" and it is so. Ocean and land, dark and light, plants, animals, humankind: everything that is needed for life comes into being through the *spirit* (or *breath*—the Hebrew word means both) of God. This is no distant Creator, setting the world in motion and then disappearing from the scene to leave the creatures to fend for themselves.

The book of Genesis and the biblical books that follow repeatedly and consistently proclaim God's relationship to and presence in the world God has created. In one very early example, we read of God portrayed as the image of a gardener who, after forming the first human being out of dust and planting a garden in which both the man and the woman later live, walks in the garden at the time of the evening breeze (Genesis 3:8). (See "Spirituality in the Garden," p. 6.)

Other passages express the presence of God in different ways. When Moses leads the gathered Israelites in their escape from Egypt, God goes before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, neither of which ever "left its place in front of the people" (Exodus 13:22). Another biblical writer portrays God as an eagle spreading its wings and nurturing its young (Deuteronomy 32:11–12). Still another imagines God as a strong rock of protection (2 Samuel 22:3). With each of these images, the biblical writers confess an enduring truth: God is here.

4. Describe your own experience of God's presence by using an image (a word or phrase) to complete this sentence: The presence of God is like \_\_\_\_\_. If you wish, share it with another member of the group, along with one or two sentences describing why you have chosen that particular image.

## The presence of God in Christ

We have seen that Genesis and Revelation, the bookends of the Bible, use words and images that convey the gathering activity of God. They also convey the conviction that the God who gathers is the same God who creates, sustains, and nurtures the whole of creation through God's presence. By their appearance in the opening and closing verses of the Bible, the twin themes of God's gathering activity and God's presence frame all the biblical books in between and suggest that gathering and presence are fundamental elements of God's relationship to the creation.

When we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, which is the focus of the remainder of this study session, we discover that a similar frame is in evidence there. (To learn more about Matthew, see "Matthew: A 'Numbers Guy' Evangelist," p. 26.)

### 5. READ ALOUD MATTHEW 1:18–23 & 28:16–20.

to discover the major theme that frames the Gospel of Matthew.

Hint: What promise do you hear repeated at the end of each of these passages? What are some of the ways you have experienced this promise in your own life or in the life of your congregation?

Matthew announces that the baby to be born, who is "God is with us," is the same one who promises, after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, "I will be with you always." Whatever else this gospel conveys about God, it certainly includes this promise: There is no place or time where God is not present. God is always with us in Jesus Christ.

Matthew does not explain exactly how we will experience that presence in our own lives or in the situations we encounter nearly 2,000 years after Jesus' earthly ministry. Instead, Matthew offers scenes from Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and shows the kinds of experiences shared by the disciples and others who came in contact with Jesus. In many of their stories the presence of Jesus means forgiveness, healing from illness, restora-

tion to the community, or opportunity for celebration. Sometimes it means being challenged to step out in faith, change long-held beliefs, or learn new ways to relate to one another. And sometimes the presence of Jesus means hearing a hard word of judgment or learning a painful truth about oneself. Almost always, as we will see, the presence of God among us will call us to be changed. (See "Experiencing God," p. 16.)

## Dig deeper: Present in the storm

In addition to the framing statements at the beginning and end of Matthew, the promise of God's presence in Jesus runs like a thread through this gospel.

6. **READ MATTHEW 14:22–33.** What might Peter and the disciples have learned from this episode concerning the presence of Jesus? How does this biblical story speak to you? What does it say about the promise of Jesus' presence in your own life?

Peter and the disciples seem to be overcome by their fear as they are battered by the wind and waves. No doubt most of us, too, have struggled against difficult circumstances and strong forces at times, although those strong forces might not be literal winds and waves. Jesus recognizes the disciples' difficulty and comes to them across the water in a concrete example of the promise to "be with you always." Peter, uncertain whether it really is Jesus, asks for confirmation. At Jesus' invitation, he steps out of the boat in faith, but when he notices all the forces arrayed against him (the wind and the waves), he sinks like a stone. Despite the fear that brings him down, Jesus is right beside him, taking him by the hand.

## Life in community: The good, the bad, and the ugly

Many passages in Matthew explicitly mention the unexpected presence of Jesus. One occurs in one of this gospel's five major discourses, in a section that conveys

In extended teaching session or speech of Jesus. Two of the most familiar of these discourses are the first, the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7, and the third, a collection of parables in chapter 13. Our study passage appears as part of the fourth discourse, in which Jesus is concerned primarily with teaching his followers how to treat one another within the community of faith.

**7. READ ALOUD MATTHEW 18:15–20.** Name at least one thing you find interesting or unusual about this passage.

It is not always easy to be a part of a gathered community of faith, especially when our human sinfulness inevitably gets in the way. With hurts large and small, inadvertent or purposeful, we wound and are wounded. This was as true for the earliest disciples as it is today, whenever the followers of Jesus do not behave as if they are gathered and bound together as recipients of God's grace.

Disagreements range from matters of doctrine (for example, what does it mean to say that Christ is present in the Eucharist?) to matters of practice (for example, is it okay for small children to receive communion?) to matters of personal preference (for example, what color should the pew cushions be?) or even to the simple fact that some people are just plain difficult to get along with (for example, why do I have to sit next to *her*?).

One former member of an intentional Christian community—a group of Christians who agree to share housing and meals—when asked why the community broke up, said, “Because of the orange juice.” Members could not agree what brand or type of juice to buy (frozen? fresh?) and how much each person should be permitted to drink. As is true for many such battles, the orange juice was only a symptom of much larger disagreements (for example, how should we spend our money? who holds the power in our community?), and it was a recurrent battle. Ultimately, the disagreement led to the breakdown of community when the mem-

bers could not figure out a way to resolve the conflict.

Significant or petty, conflicts seem to be as much a part of community life as committee meetings and potluck suppers. It is no wonder, then, that Matthew includes this teaching from Jesus. (See “Jesus Says ‘Go!’” p. 22.)

- 8.** List the steps toward reconciliation for a person to take when she or he has a conflict with another member of the church. Which of these steps do you think would be the hardest for you to carry out? Why?

The fact that Jesus needed to offer these detailed instructions and that Matthew included them in his gospel (they do not appear in the other gospels) suggests that the early church may have been as prone to conflict as we are today. It is not always easy to live as members of the gathered community. (See “Conflicts Then and Now,” p. 36.)

- 9.** What does it mean to say that somebody should “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”? As you reflect on this question, consider how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. What might this look like in your own congregation?

Although Gentiles and tax collectors were often reviled by the Jewish populace of first century Palestine as outsiders or collaborators with the Roman authorities, nonetheless, they remained the objects of Jesus' ministry. Indeed, Matthew was himself a tax collector when he was called to be a disciple (Matthew 9:9).

Jesus frequently dined with “tax collectors and sinners,” much to the chagrin of the Pharisees, and he made a point of saying that those whom he called were “not the righteous, but sinners”—a detail that is probably good for us to remember when we read Jesus’ advice whenever “another member of the church sins against you.” To the complaint that the church is full of sinners, we can only say, “Yes, and that includes all of us.”

## Dig deeper: Binding and loosing

**REREAD MATTHEW 18:18.** Scholars familiar with the Jewish context of Jesus' ministry and Matthew's gospel suggest that binding and loosing refer to that which is forbidden (binding) and that which is permitted (loosing). Said in another way, the words refer to an obligation (binding) or a freedom from obligation (loosing). That is, binding and loosing have to do with the community's discernment ("on earth") of God's desire ("in heaven") for how we ought to live in relationship with one another.

People sometimes understand this verse to mean that God will support or allow whatever the church decides. However, it is clear in the Greek language in which Matthew was written that the process actually flows in the other direction. The Greek reads, "whatever you (plural) bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you (plural) loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven." In other words, when the community discerns faithfully, its actions will be in line with something that God already desires.

How does the community (the church) figure this out? Faithful discernment about what to do or how to act (binding and loosing) will be a reflection of what Jesus has taught. Is there somebody who is straying from the right path (a "lost sheep," perhaps?) In the passage right before ours, Jesus has something to say about one who is lost (Matthew 18:10–14). Have we been hurt or wronged by somebody we need to forgive? Jesus has something to say about forgiveness in the passage right after ours (Matthew 18:21–22). This verse on binding and loosing suggests that if we want to do it faithfully and well, we will do it in a way that is in line with Jesus.

10. What might it be like if we were to work through conflict and disagreement as if Jesus were in the room with us—wherever two or three are gathered? You might consider this question in light of an actual conflict that has affected your own congregation.

## There's nowhere God is not

Life in community can be energizing, enlightening, encouraging, and entertaining. It also can be messy and difficult. Jesus recognizes that our human sinfulness will inevitably lead to conflicts, accusations and disruptions of our life together. He also recognizes that when there is conflict in community, somebody or something has to change in order for the conflict to be resolved; perhaps, even, the people themselves will have to change. This passage from Matthew 18 establishes a process for bringing out the circumstances that can support that change, particularly since accountability may be a powerful motivator. Even more than that, however, Jesus' teaching offers words of hope in the midst of whatever ugliness we find ourselves in.

No matter how messy things get, we are not alone. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus says, "I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Jesus does not say "where two or three like each other," or "where two or three are righteous," or "where two or three share the same racial, ethnic, or gender identification," or even "where two or three are being nice." When we have been hurt or when we hurt somebody else, when we cannot find a way to agree, when we do not know how to get along, when our conflicts threaten to break us apart, Jesus is there. Wherever two or three are gathered in his name, Jesus—who is God with us—is there among them.

## What might it mean for us?

From the Creation account to the long-awaited return of Christ, biblical writers proclaim that the God who gathered the waters is the same one who remains present always with the gathered people of God. Jesus' own teaching in the Gospel of Matthew affirms that he is with us now and always, even in the midst of difficult or messy situations. It may not always be easy to live together as the gathered people of God, but we can find hope in the presence of the One who is God with us.

## Dig deeper: Promises for a plural people

God's presence in Christ is a communal promise, a promise made to many, not just to me or you. The communal nature of the promise is most obvious in verses that we read earlier in the study: At the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth ("they shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us") and in the passage from Matthew 18 ("where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them"). However, it is present, too, in Jesus' final words in this gospel, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). In the original Greek language of Matthew's gospel, the *you* in 28:20 is plural.

The Greek language in which Matthew was written uses different words to mean *you*, depending on whether there is just one person involved (*you*, singular) or multiple people (*you*, plural; "*you all*" in colloquial English, or even "*all you all*" in some places). English translations do not always distinguish whether Jesus or anyone else intends the singular or the plural *you*, although it can sometimes make a difference in how we understand or interpret the passage.

In Matthew 18:15–20, for example, the first verse refers to *you* singular—"If another member of the church sins against you (singular)..." It remains singular all the way through verse 17. Verses 18–20, however, all use the plural form of *you*, suggesting that the promises made in the latter half of the passage are not limited only to the one who has been wronged, but to the whole community, as well.

11. What difference does it make for your understanding of the passage to distinguish these instances of singular and plural forms of *you*?

12. How might this month's study be inviting you to change... Your actions? The way you think about things? The way you understand Christ's presence in your midst? If you wish, reflect on the presence of God in Christ in the gathered community that is your church community. Is there conflict, struggle, pain, tragedy, or an issue that might be addressed by the things you have discussed in this study?

13. Write short poem or a Haiku (basically a 17 syllable verse divided in English into three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables), draw a picture, make up a song, or engage in another creative activity to reflect something that you have learned from this month's study. You are invited to share your creation with the group the next time you gather for Bible study together.

## Looking ahead

Next month we will join the disciples in the Gospel of Mark as they gather with the crowds to learn from Jesus. At times they struggle with their lessons and need a little extra tutoring, which suggests that we are not alone if we sometimes find it difficult to understand the ways of God.

## Closing prayer

Gracious God, In Jesus you promise to be with us always, in the glorious times and in the challenging times; when we live according to your ways and even when we do not. We give thanks for the magnificent gift of your presence in our gathered community, whether we are two or three, or even two- or three-thousand, and ask that you would keep us mindful of that presence after we leave this place and these people, trusting that in Christ Jesus you will never leave us. Amen. 

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Check out our Facebook page. Bible study author Audrey West will join us in conversation and answer questions and comments. Go to [www.facebook.com/gathermagazine](http://www.facebook.com/gathermagazine).



# Conflict

THEN AND NOW

by Jay A. Schroeder

Our present-day church is afflicted with controversies and divisions. Some arguments deal with important matters of church teaching, worship practices, and the authority of Scripture. Other divisions are caused by personality conflicts, difficult individuals, and bitterly quarreling factions within our church communities. We might be tempted to yearn for a “golden age” when things were simpler and more peaceful. However, there was never a time when the church was free of conflict. What did the earliest Christians fight about?

## Interpreting God's Law

A recurring controversy in the New Testament was the question of obedience to the laws found in the Hebrew scriptures, especially circumcision for Gentile (non-Jewish) men wishing to become Christian. The Lord commands circumcision in Leviticus 12:3. It is a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:9–14).

Christianity began as a movement with Judaism. Since the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews, the question of circumcision was not initially a problem. The men were already circumcised. However, very soon after Jesus' resurrection, people questioned whether

men who wanted to become part of the church needed to be circumcised. And they asked whether all believers—whether male or female—needed to follow Jewish dietary restrictions and other rules. The Apostle Paul, who opposed requiring circumcision for new believers, used strong language to write about this topic. But why was circumcision so hotly contested in the early church? What was at stake?

In the first century A.D., at the time of the New Testament apostles, many Gentiles felt drawn to worship the God of Israel. They listened to and studied the Jewish scriptures. Many Gentiles attended synagogues in cities throughout the Roman Empire, frequently making generous monetary contributions. They also came from far and wide to visit the Jerusalem Temple. Some of these followers included Roman officials and people of high standing. These Gentiles were called “God-worshippers” or “God-fearers” (Acts 10:2, 10:22, 13:16, 16:14). In the book of Acts, Luke calls them “devout” men and women (Acts 13:50, 17:4).

There is evidence that Jews welcomed the presence of these “God-fearers.” Gentiles could worship God in the synagogues and even enter part of the Jerusalem Temple complex. However, in order to become Jewish, men usually needed to be circumcised. (Not all Jews agreed with this. A small minority of Jewish leaders argued that it was sufficient to immerse in a ritual bath, similar to Christian baptism.) Until a man was circumcised, and until *any* convert—male or female—was willing to obey rules about diet, washing, and other matters, the individual would be respected as a God-fearer but not fully included as a member of the Jewish community.

Many of the earliest Gentile converts to Christianity had already been among these “God-fearers” who were familiar with the Jewish scriptures and drawn to monotheism, the worship of one God rather than the large assortment of Greco-Roman gods. Paul described himself as an apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7–9). As part of his missionary strategy, Paul probably targeted the God-fearers. This made sense. These Gentiles were already sympathetic to monotheism. They knew the stories of Abraham, Sarah, and the other heroes of the Hebrew scriptures.

Christians understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and King David. Thus they wondered whether a man could really be united to the Christian church and be part of God’s plan of salvation without circumcision. This was a question about how to interpret the scriptures and fulfill the commands given by God. The book of Acts describes a discussion in Jerusalem where the Christian leaders agreed that Gentiles need not be circumcised or keep the law of Moses strictly (Acts 15:1–29). But other parts of the New Testament suggest that the matter was not easily settled and that the issue kept arising. We have evidence that Christians struggled with this question in Jerusalem, Antioch (a city in Syria), Galatia (part of what is now modern-day Turkey), Rome, Philippi (a Roman colony in northern Greece), and in the Greek city of Corinth.

Though Paul generally encouraged harmony among quarreling church members, he himself was often embroiled in controversy. He fought to defend principles that mattered to him. Paul sharply rebuked his opponents in his letter to the mixed Jewish and Gentile community of Christians in Rome (Romans 2:1–29). When he learned that the Galatians wondered whether they should be circumcised, he writes: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1). In his letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul mentions the “dogs” and “evil workers... who mutilate

the flesh”—strong language about his opponents who are encouraging men to be circumcised (Philippians 3:2). Note that this was *not* an argument caused by mainstream Jews, the ancestors of those who currently belong to the Jewish faith. It was an argument *within* the Christian community about how to belong to the body of Christ. Was a man joined to the church through baptism *and* circumcision, or was it through baptism alone? Paul answers in favor of baptism alone: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek” (Galatians 3:27–28).

Since we live nearly 2,000 years later and Christians have lived comfortably with the outcome for many centuries, circumcision may not seem like a major issue. But at that time the issue was how to interpret and apply the scriptures—and how to welcome and include the entire community.

### **Strong Opinions, Strong Personalities**

Some Christians fought about which leader’s teachings to follow. In 1 Corinthians 1:12, Paul reports that some people at Corinth were saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas.” (“Cephas” is Peter’s name in Aramaic.) Though different leaders may have disagreed about church teaching, it is possible that the *followers* of these important teachers exaggerated their differences, causing even deeper rifts in the community. At the same time, Paul reports that he *did* have bitter opponents. Again and again, Paul felt that he needed to defend his credentials as an apostle because he was under attack (1 Corinthians 15:1–11, 2 Corinthians 11:1–12:10, Galatians 1:11–2:10). Though Paul is accepted as an authority by Christians now, the question of who was considered an “apostle” (someone sent by God) was not yet settled. Did authority come from being commissioned by Jesus himself? Paul had never met Jesus of Nazareth during the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Instead, Paul says that his

own authority as an apostle came from the risen Christ appearing to him after the resurrection. But apparently not everyone agreed with his claims to leadership.

In order to explain the correctness of his own position and the hypocrisy of his opponents, Paul reported to the Galatians about a fight that he had with Peter in Antioch. Paul says that Peter was initially willing to share table fellowship with non-Jewish followers of the risen Christ. Peter ate with them, and perhaps he did not express concern about whether the food was kosher (prepared according to Jewish rules for diet). But when stricter followers came from Jerusalem, Peter was no longer so liberal. He stopped eating with the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11–14). Paul accuses Peter of being a hypocrite. If Peter himself was willing to forgo some of the rules for awhile, how could he require strict observance from the Gentiles? Paul writes: “I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned” (Galatians 2:11). Unfortunately we do not have Peter’s side of the story! We also do not know whether these men’s personalities made things better or worse.

### **Conflicts at Corinth**

As we have seen, the conflicts in many New Testament communities can be traced to questions about circumcision and obedience to Jewish laws. The situation is different in Corinth. There is barely a subject or issue that *wasn’t* a source of controversy. The Corinthians dealt with questions about sexual morality, gender roles, social status, community leadership, church teaching, and worship practices. The congregation was divided into factions. Some members were even taking other members to court (1 Corinthians 6:1–11).

One group of Corinthian Christians argued for strict sexual morals while others were quite lax. A man lived with his stepmother in a sexual relationship (see 1 Corinthians 5:1). This scandalized some members of the community while others tolerated this behavior. Other men visited prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:15).

At the other end of the spectrum, some Corinthians apparently thought that believers should be completely celibate—including spouses who were legally married (1 Corinthians 7:1–16).

Paul was not of one mind with the Corinthian community about women's roles in worship. Paul assumed that women *would* pray and prophesy when the community gathered for prayer, but he urged women to have some sort of head covering when exercising worship leadership (1 Corinthians 11:2–16). In later writings, composed in Paul's name, there would be stronger language, urging women to learn in silence rather than teaching in the community (1 Timothy 2:11–12). Many interpreters now regard this as evidence that women *were* instructing others—no doubt a cause for controversy in a society that assumed that men should hold authority over women.

Addressing the Corinthians, Paul writes that “there is jealousy and quarreling among you” (1 Corinthians 3:3). Apparently some members at Corinth believed that their spiritual gifts—such as prophecy, wisdom, or speaking in tongues (miraculous speech in unknown languages)—made them superior to others. The Lord’s Supper became an occasion for division rather than unity. Some people—presumably wealthy church members—ate the community meal earlier, before the lower-class workers and slaves arrived. Thus, according to Paul, the Lord’s Supper was used to “humiliate those who have nothing” (1 Corinthians 11:22). Another New Testament letter, written in the name of James, suggests that preferential treatment for the rich was an ongoing problem (James 2:1–7).

### One in Christ Jesus

In his letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul urges two women, Euodia and Syntyche, “to be of the same mind in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2). We do not know

what issue divided these women. Until recently, many interpreters blamed women’s “quarrelsome nature” and assumed that there was some sort of “catfight” resulting from female bickering. Some presumed that the division was caused by irritable personalities fighting over some trivial matter. It is possible that there was a personality dispute, but it is just as likely that they disagreed on some matter of importance. Paul himself honors both Euodia and Syntyche with the comment that the women had “struggled beside me in the work of the gospel” together with “the rest of my co-workers” (Philippians 4:3).

. . . for  
all of you  
are ONE in  
Christ Jesus

there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Most New Testament scholars believe that Paul was quoting a saying that was recited when people were baptized. Thus, when he deals with some of the most controversial issues in the church, Paul fittingly reminds his readers of the words that were spoken at their own baptisms.

In our own day, as in New Testament times, some of our disagreements are grudges or petty rivalries. Other church disputes deal with profound matters of conscience and the interpretation of God’s word.

Sometimes we—like Paul—are called to speak a bold message that will be unwelcome or unpopular. Other times we are called to defer to others, putting aside our own agendas for the sake of peace in the community. In *all* cases we are called to express the unity that God has already given us in our baptism, for all of us are “one in Christ Jesus.”

**The Rev. Dr. Joy A. Schroeder**, an ELCA pastor, teaches church history at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University, both in Columbus, Ohio.



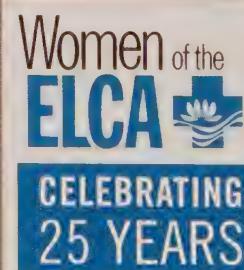
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GRACE NOTES

## Leaning into the Future

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



# What's the future of

Women of the ELCA as an organization? I think about that a lot. Supporting the women of this church is my work. We've been talking about this on Facebook. I'd like to share the thoughts of three women:

**SHERYL:** "Leadership of Women of the ELCA in my congregation has been pretty much the same group of women for at least 20 years. They do all of their activities on weekday mornings, which precludes just about all of the women who are not past retirement age from participating, and they don't provide child care, which keeps the stay-at-home moms with preschoolers from participating. Now, I think that the group as it stands right now serves a purpose for the women involved ... but the problem lies in the unwillingness to change to accommodate the lives younger women. Current leadership is not open to another group starting in the evening or at another time when working women can participate."

Sheryl goes on to say, "I joined this group on Facebook because I am really impressed with a lot of the materials Women of the ELCA publishes, and I really liked what I saw at the 2009 youth gathering in New Orleans. I'm impressed that, on the national level, the organization is about more than Mother's Day teas and quilts, and I'm excited to see women advocating for social justice from a point of view informed by faith in Christ. It just isn't my experience on the congregational level, and I don't know that it ever will be."

**KATHIE:** "Our church has a strong core group, but WELCA as a whole seems to be aging and possibly dying. There are Bible study 'circles' that meet at various times, but are not very well attended. The business 'board meeting' is during the week at noon. No easy way for most working women to attend. I have recently been wrestling with the question of how to revitalize it, because I know how important it is and I love the stuff that comes from the larger WELCA organization. Our history is rich with faith-filled women. We just aren't transitioning into the future very gracefully."

**JENNY:** "What if there were a few young moms in the church who'd like to come during the day if there was child care provided? And what if, once a month, the quilters could have an 'evening quilt,' if someone could help with driving? There needs to be some reaching out by the younger gals, too, for some compromise. I think a lot of the older ladies think the younger ones don't want to be part, and the younger ladies think the older ones don't want them, and no one 'in the middle' wants to or knows how to reach out and bridge the gap between."

We need at least two things to respond to these challenges: the best thinking of all women in the church and openness to the Holy Spirit. What do you think? Write to [linda.bushkofsky@elca.org](mailto:linda.bushkofsky@elca.org) or post on our Facebook wall at [www.facebook.com/WomenoftheELCA](http://www.facebook.com/WomenoftheELCA).

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

## God, I'm struck by my

tendency to seek out those who are like me. I am conflict averse. When differences become conflict, when we start struggling to make it "my way" versus "your way," I can feel my stomach start to knot up and my brain start to race. Mostly I want the fuss part to go away.

I know there are some who love a good fight. They love to win. They love to out shout and out maneuver. They love to prevail, and against someone like me, they often do. This happens one-to-one, and also between cultures. Think of the rise and fall of empires. When one of us is right, the other often has to be wrong.

In my experience, this take-no-prisoners perspective is effective for growing profits (short-term anyway), but it seems to be hard on community, especially communities where profit is not the goal. Think families, friendships, schools, neighborhoods, and congregations. When only one person or one side is right, the other side is left out.

If I think about the wonder of your creation, God, and the marvelous variety you built into this world, I wonder if thinking in terms of sides is even faithful. What if it were the case that you have created all these different perspectives to help us see the world as you do? The hard part is that we need to actually live together, get some things done, and move ahead. We can't just spend our days appreciating each other.

That's why we need your presence. We need you to help us sort out what

is most important, because we will each see that differently. Without you, we could too easily begin to see each other as enemies to be conquered. What if we slowed things down, really listened, and then tried to sort out how you might have us move ahead, based on our best guess about what your mercy and justice might look like?

That's why we need Jesus' example, and his cross and tomb. We need the forgiveness he offers: for ourselves, when we do less well at respecting each other, and for our communities, so we have something to provide a bit of redemptive glue, lest we bolt for the familiar instead of engaging in our differences. Because really, without forgiveness, how could we be community? How could we be parents, or partners, or members, or even people? How could we go on when we inevitably fail to live up to our God-given potential to do good in the world?

And that's why we need your Spirit, calling us to be more than we are, to stretch and learn and celebrate. We are walking miracles, but we have plenty of room to become more of what God imagines for us and for our communities. We need the Spirit breathing into our nostrils the breath of life every day, so we become living beings called to be with each other for the sake of the whole world.

Yikes, God. That's a tall order. Be with us! In Jesus' name. Amen.

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.

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